



CONX Transcript: South African Delegates: The President's Forum with Young African Leaders

A Webchat with Lesego Sekano, Palesa Shongwe, and Fred Swaniker  
Thursday, August 26, 09:00 EDT

CONX Moderator Sarah: Welcome everyone! In 20 minutes, we will be joined by the three South African delegates to The President's Forum with Young African Leaders. You can read more about Lesego Sekano, Palesa Shongwe, and Fred Swaniker in the slide show to the left. Please feel free to submit your questions for any of these delegates at any time.

CONX Moderator Sarah: We will be getting started with our webchat now. Our presenters today are Palesa Shongwe, Lesego Sekano, and Fred Swaniker. Each of them came to Washington earlier this summer for the President's Forum with Young African Leaders. They will be telling us about their experience during the Forum, what they do in South Africa, and their roles as young leaders.

Palesa Shongwe: Hi, everyone. I am an emerging filmmaker living in Johannesburg - my work is creating films, both dramatic and documentary, about social development and human rights. My passion lies in the power of story to create social awareness and connection across borders and social boundaries.

Lesego Sekano: My name is Lesego Sekano. I work for the National Union of Mineworkers as the International Relations Officer. I am passionate about the development of Africa and the prospect of an Africa that we can all be proud of and independent. Thank you for joining us today

younoussa sidibe: My name is younoussa Sidibe.

CONX Moderator Sarah: Welcome, Younoussa. Thank you for joining us!

Palesa Shongwe: Hi, Younoussa - thank you!

Abdoulaye: I'm Abdoulaye , I'm from Mali.

CO.NX Moderator Kristin: Welcome! Thanks for joining us!

Fred Swaniker: Hello--this is Fred. I founded the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, which aims to develop future leaders for Africa

Question [Evelyn]: It is great to see South Africans on this panel, my question is why is only one political affiliation attending? Won't this surely add to diverse population? Why aren't all peoples of South Africa and political parties present? This gap needs to be bridged as South Africans do not understand each other.

Answer [Palesa Shongwe]: Hi, Evelyn. It was interesting that none of the delegates from South Africa went as affiliates of any political organization. In fact, this was true for all delegates from the other countries. We went with our different knowledge in our different fields, but as individuals interested in genuine, not just political change.

Q [Kutlwano Smith]: What do long-term leaders view as their essential professional?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Kutlwano, I don't think that the type of profession one is in is cast in stone in order to be able to become a leader one has to have foresight and passion for what they want to achieve.

Q [Randy Ngubane]: What does it take to be a good leader?

A [Fred Swaniker]: In my opinion, there are 3 key ingredients to being a good leader: First, one requires courage--to step up and change the status quo despite challenges and resistance. Second, one requires practice. You learn how to become a good leader not through a text book but through experience. So one needs to constantly find opportunities to practice leadership, and the more you do it, the better you become. Thirdly, I believe you need good values, because very often there is not a clear answer to every decision you have to make as a leader. Your values will serve as your guide in those cases. I believe with courage, practice/experience, and good values, you have the makings of a great leader!

mohamed: Mohamed from Mali, Bamako. Hello.

CONX Moderator Sarah: Hello Mohamed, welcome, and thanks for joining us.

Q [Lucien malan]: I would like to know aim of that forum please.

A [Lesego Sekano]: Lucien, good question. The aim of the Forum was to bring together young leaders from across the continent to participate in dialogue and begin to find working solutions for Africa coming from future leaders of these great countries in the continent.

Q [Younoussa Sidibe]: My question is will be about African unity: Why Africa cannot be united states?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: This was a question that some of us started asking towards the end of the meeting - why couldn't we get together on our own, without having first to be invited to the US to encounter each other? I think there is not an easy answer - first the issue is probably one of administration. Africa is extremely diverse because of our divergent histories. The second issue is this - you cannot unite Africa politically until the people of Africa themselves feel united. So the work is on individual Africans to learn more about the Continent and engage with it. Educate yourself about Africa. This will lay the foundation for Unity in the future.

Q [Zaziwe]: How can you inspire the African youth to move on despite poverty, diseases and illiteracy?

A [Fred Swaniker]: Zaziwe--that's a very good question. It's easy to give up when we see all these obstacles. I think we can inspire African youth to keep moving forward by showing them role models of people who kept moving despite even bigger obstacles than they face--people like Nelson Mandela who had so much in his way, but kept going. I think good mentorship from others who have overcome difficulties is also key.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Question from our live audience [at the Rosa Parks Library, Soweto]: Did you meet many African Americans and how did you experience their view of the Forum?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Hi Chris, we met a great deal of African Americans; however they were not part of the Forum. We met them from different organizations such as the Boys' and Girls' Clubs of America, which is a social program funded by the US government in helping children in rough neighborhoods by having community centers.

A [Fred Swaniker]: We also met several African Americans in senior roles in the US government, such as Johnny Carson, the Under-Secretary of State for Africa under Hillary Clinton. I was also very surprised and impressed by how most of President Obama's staff in the White House were African-American.

CONX Moderator Sarah: Thank you all for your excellent questions. Please continue to submit your comments and questions here.

Q [Abdoulaye]: Do you think this united Africa is possible?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Very interesting question, Abdoulaye, that we were also grappling with while we were there. We felt that a united Africa is possible but we are still far from realizing that dream. We have to begin by cleaning house in different countries and begin building this Africa of ours.

Abdoulaye: I appreciate very well this initiative from young Africans.

Q [Thulani Vatsha]: My concern is concerning partnership or rather the uterine [sic] that the developed countries normally raise. One wonders that what kind of partnership they propose?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: Yes. This is an important point to raise and one I wish we'd had more time and opportunity to explore with the people we met during our visit. I think it is healthy to have a critical and analytical mind about the 'benevolence' of the western / developed world. Sometimes, you are given with one hand, while the other takes something away from you. Again, I have to stress this - educate yourself about what's happening on the continent and understand who is helping you and why.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: How are the delegates going to involve their communities/fellow South Africans to implement initiatives decided upon at the Forum?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Well at the moment we are still working on programs of sustainability. Communities can start helping themselves by having dialogue and getting the youth involved. A lot of the times the youth are spoken about and/or at; we are working on tangible solutions to involve communities and work together to help each other.

Q [Abdoulaye]: And there is one problem: the young African must be educated, and if people are educated the mentality changes. That is the case of some continents.

A [Lesego Sekano]: I could not agree with you more, Abdoulaye. Education plays a key role in development, and a change of mindset will be even more important. It is up to every African to be the change they want to see in the continent.

Q [Basil]: Perhaps not the forum for this question, but having met young leaders from around Africa, do you feel that they can foster more cooperation, mutual understanding and respect, transparent government and respect for human rights or do they simply embrace the same values, practices and prejudices of the "old" leaders.

A [Palesa Shongwe]: Hey Basil. My dad always says this - absolute power corrupts absolutely - there is no guarantee that young leaders today, still idealistic and hopeful, will not become cynical and disillusioned in the future. But, I think the difference with this generation of leaders and the era of leadership we (you included) represent is that we are aware of the danger of concentrating power in the hands of the few. Ours is the era of inclusion (we have more self-esteem and knowledge of the world than people of the generations before us, perhaps). This attitude of 'inclusiveness' I think will mean a different kind of leadership coming up - one that is more accountable and more cooperative.

Q [Randy Ngubane]: Are leaders born or made?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Randy, leaders are cultivated. We all have the potential to be leaders; we just need the opportunity to cultivate and harness the leader in us!

Q [Kutlwano Smith]: How do you see your role in sustaining reform?

A [Fred Swaniker]: I see our role as young leaders as being continual agitators for change from those who are in positions of power and responsibility, but more importantly to be the change we want to see ourselves--to take concrete action that can help bring about reform. We can't always wait for others to do things for us.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: In the three weeks that you have been back, what have done to start realizing your vision for Africa?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Well, having been back for only three weeks, we have been involved in a lot of media representation. The stumbling block is that we are all involved in other things besides this Forum, and, as indicated, this is only the beginning of this Forum. Thus, there have not been any concrete projects set yet. We are however working on developing a number of projects.

Karin Kitching: Hi guys, there is a plan to have another forum meeting, this time on the continent in different regions, using technology to connect us to each other over the period. This then means more youth within the individual countries will be able to access the programs etc. It is a good idea to have an African leader's forum Southern African branch. Fred runs a school called the African Leadership Academy that has connections with youth-based organizations and schools on the continent. His and other organizations can be harnessed to reach young people and create something that we sustain ourselves. Of course, it will take time.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Do the delegates have any thoughts on how funding for entrepreneurship in Africa is going to be made available?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Well in terms of the funding, that is one issue that we were all frustrated by from across the continent because we have a lot of good ideas but not enough funding. One suggestion was for people to come together that have similar ideas and form co-operatives where they bring money together. Because ultimately we have to make our own future - knock on doors, make noise and never give up. Sometimes it does not start with money, but unfortunately funding remains a big problem.

Q [Mohamed]: How can we improve the African society without a good manager?

A [Fred Swaniker]: Mohamed, I think we can all do our part to improve African society in our own small corners of that society. We can't only wait for our so-called 'leaders' to make change. In our own way, ALL of us can improve society, and it is the sum of all those contributions that will bring change.

Q [Kutlwano Smith]: How do you see your role in sustaining reform?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: Sustaining reform - I think this has to do with personal commitment. For me personally, I would like to use my skills in information technology to create awareness and connection between continents. This is for me a good place to start - get more of us to know about each other in a meaningful way. I have learned not to make big declarations when it comes to service and to do a little at a time, without fading.

CONX Moderator Sarah: Thank you all for your excellent questions. We are about halfway through the program, but even after the program, we will continue the discussion about the future of Africa on our Facebook page. "Like" us and join the discussion by going to <http://co-nx.state.gov>

Q [younoussa sidibe]: What are the causes of civil wars in Africa?

A [Fred Swaniker]: Younoussa, I am not an expert on what has caused all the civil wars in Africa, but in my opinion the root cause of a lot of these wars is poverty. When there is poverty, resources are scarce. With scarce resources, people start to fight over them. You hardly hear of civil wars in rich nations, and I believe this is because there are more than enough resources to go around.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Do the South African delegates have any plans to make a public document on the forum and their plans to advance the forum?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: Hi, this is a great idea. We are working on this, but there is so much to write about! We are trying to get as much information out there as we can, but in the meantime, you can read up more about the forum on the net.

Q [Thulani Vatsha]: With regard to volunteering as part of a government initiative to embark on skill-development, particularly here in South Africa, it is a right move, but South African YOUTH find it difficult to partake in those initiatives because most of youth are coming from broken families as well as raised by single parents with many dependents. How can those youth in that situation help?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Thulani, I would like to take that situation and turn it into a positive. While in the US, we met with people from the Peace Corps where some of the volunteers came from the same situation and found that by volunteering they discovered other talents that they did not know they had. Once of them went on to help open a school in Mali. Thus, coming from a broken home should not be a stumbling block.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the delegates discuss having foreign CEOs come to Africa to mentor the African business community in skills development?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: This was one of the ideas put forward - mentorship between African and American professionals BUT I think it is important to say that we have so many able, intelligent, innovative leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals in South Africa and on the continent. I believe it's important to ask for an exchange of knowledge and experience from Africa not the US. We can learn from each other.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the delegates discuss barriers to trade at the Forum?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Well we have to bear in mind that the meeting was only for 3 days. We discussed mainly broad strategies of development and not specifics. However, my experience is that it is good to have trade barriers and tariffs so we can grown our domestic exports.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the Forum address the public health crisis of HIV/AIDS in Africa?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: We spoke about this as one of the major crises facing the continent, but I have to tell you that this is one issue that will not be fully addressed in three days. We did have HIV activists present.

CONX Moderator Sarah: If you missed any of the CONX programs during the Forum, you can either listen to or watch all of them by going to our special Forum site:

[www.connectsolutions.com/africa](http://www.connectsolutions.com/africa)

Q [Chris du Plessis]: How were the delegates selected, and will more delegates be selected in future?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Delegates were selected through the US embassies across Africa. We are not sure what the criterion was, but we all had to submit our CVs. My thinking is

that they chose delegates that they had interacted with through their respective jobs and recognized as making a difference. I can't say about new delegates but please join our group on Facebook. You have to remember, though, that this is a new forum and is only 3 weeks old thus we still have a lot to learn and adhere to.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: How does America benefit from the Forum?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: This is an important question. My understanding from what President Obama said to us in response to this question is that the US, like the rest of the world, will benefit from a more stable Africa because our growth and development is crucial to the general development on the globe. Basically, a strong Africa is one that will need less aid dollars, that will lose less professionals to the brain drain, that will suffer less emigration, and that will foster stronger economies for global participation.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the Forum address the issue of private philanthropy having a greater role in Africa?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: We did. Some of the connections we made were with organizations that are interested in fostering those relationships. The US embassy has information about interested private funders - it will be good to get in touch.

Q [Kutlwano Smith]: What type of leadership styles do you think Africa as a whole needs to follow in order to see transformation within the continent?

A [Fred Swaniker]: Kutlwano, I don't think there is just one magical leadership style that will fix our continent. We need a mix of leaders, with different styles, and in different fields, to bring about the transformation of the continent. The problem we've had in the past is that we've had too much of just one type of leader: the authoritative, top-down leader. We need more consultative leaders, some revolutionaries, some nurturing leaders, and some inspiring leaders. With all these different types, they will complement each other and enable us to make better strides as a continent

CONX Moderator Sarah: We are nearing the end of our time. We wish all your questions could have been addressed. If your question was not answered, please come to our Facebook page and contribute your thoughts there: <http://co-nx.state.gov>. We will post a complete transcript of today's chat in this room later today.

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the Forum address the issue of Chinese investment / development in Africa?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Yes, the forum touched on the Chinese issue slightly. The majority feeling was that Chinese investment had their own pros and cons but mostly felt let down by their governments who went on to have partnerships with China. However, again, this was very broad.



Thulani Vatsha: Interaction, or rather economic integration, with the rest of the world as a means to stimulate growth of individual countries is one of the developments that a young continent needs to take advantage of. But it becomes difficult for other African states to partake in this.

Q [Basil]: Many of us have heard President Obama address the Forum, but do you three have a message/s you want communicate to young Africans based on your experiences at the Forum?

A [Lesego Sekano]: Well, Basil, my message is: change starts with an individual. Thus, we all have a role to play in developing South Africa and Africa as a whole. Be the change you want to see!

Q [Chris du Plessis]: Did the Forum address the current state of technology as a barrier to development?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: I attended the forum about technology and human development, and I completely agree with you - technology in Africa is for serving the development of people, not as an end in itself (just for consumer consumption, e.g.). We spoke about how there exists great opportunity in the development of technology for Africa - because in Africa we catch on to technological innovation more quickly and with more thirst (e.g, we went straight to cell phones instead of waiting for telephone lines to be connected). So there is a LOT of talk about technological innovation in Africa, specifically around Internet access, bandwidth improvement etc. Find out about APPS FOR AFRICA ([www.apps4africa.org](http://www.apps4africa.org)) on the net. Also we spoke about technological innovation in the area of sustainable energy.

Q [Randy Ngubane]: What is the philosophy of leadership?

A [Palesa Shongwe]: I think it was Fred that said something like Leadership is Service. Basically, leading is service, not self-enrichment. And leadership is about engaging and getting involved in making change on the ground.

Fred Swaniker: Thank you to all for your very insightful questions! I wish you all the best in your own leadership journeys. We need all your talents and energies as leaders to help us make our beautiful continent into an even greater place!

Lesego Sekano: It was great being with you. Thanks for all the questions. We hope we answered them to your liking. Cheers to all the African leaders here today.

Palesa Shongwe: Hey everyone - thank you so much for all the questions and I do hope some of these answers have got you thinking. Please do get more info any way you can and if you need to get in touch with us, we're on facebook!

CONX Moderator Sarah: Thanks to everyone for joining us today! We wish we could have answered all of your excellent questions. Please feel free to continue to submit comments here or continue the discussion now on our Facebook page: <http://co-nx.state.gov>. Sign up for our newsletter to learn about upcoming CONX webchats: <http://eepurl.com/kmBn>. This webchat is now closed.